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# Enlightenment Revisited

## Romantic, historicist, hermeneutic and comparative perspectives on Zen

André van der Braak

Although the Buddhist Zen tradition<sup>1</sup> has been known in the West for about a century, only in the past decennia a critical philosophical investigation and confrontation with this tradition has come under way. When surveying the history of the Western philosophical reception of Zen, it is useful to distinguish three approaches.

### 1. Romantic Zen

Already in the nineteenth century Buddhism was welcomed in the West by Romantics who considered it an antidote for a Western culture that was suffering from an excessive rationalism. Schopenhauer and Wagner considered Buddhism a new source of inspiration for the West that had outgrown Christianity. Even Nietzsche, who didn't share their enthusiasm for Buddhism, favorably contrasted Buddhism to Christianity in *The Antichrist*: as a religion, it was "a hundred times more positivistic" (Nietzsche KSA 6 AC 20).

In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zen was presented to the West in the writings of the Japanese scholar D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966). In his voluminous writings Suzuki interpreted Zen as a universal mysticism, free from cultural trappings, that offered a meditation practice aimed at the realization of a non-dual state of consciousness. In order to translate this ultimate goal of Zen in accessible terms for Westerners, Suzuki followed the literary custom adopted in the nineteenth century, and drew upon the European word "enlightenment"<sup>2</sup>.

The European Enlightenment was the historical era in which it was thought that the clear light of human reason would dispel the darkness of superstition. Kant thought that the Enlightenment would enable an emancipation from heteronomy and authority. By the use of reason, people would be able to see things as

<sup>1</sup> When I speak about "the Zen tradition", I'm referring to both the Chinese Chan tradition and the Japanese Zen tradition. Even though it would be more accurate to speak about Chan/Zen, the term 'Zen' has become a well known term in the West, especially through the transmission of Suzuki.

<sup>2</sup> The search for suitable indigenous concepts to communicate foreign concepts is of course inevitable. A similar search occurred in China during the formative stages of Chinese Buddhism, when the translators struggled to communicate "nirvana" and other analogous terms to their Chinese readership.

they are for themselves, rather than be dependent upon divine revelation. This idea of seeing things as they really are, out of a capacity to see clearly and without prejudice, was used to interpret the notion of nirvana, the goal of Theravada Buddhism, that reached Europe in the nineteenth century (see Welbon 1968). Once meditation and contemplation had liberated the mind from disturbing emotions, preconceptions and attachments, a clear and unbiased perception would become possible.

Interestingly enough, the interpreters of the Zen tradition to the West did not draw their images from the Western rationalist Enlightenment tradition, but from its rival tradition, Romanticism. This tradition preferred intuitive wisdom to rational analysis, feeling to thought, and ancient tradition to modern science. Therefore, since the early nineteenth century, Romantics had felt attracted to the mysterious and ancient Orient, with its profound wisdom that was unspoiled by the rationalism of Western science<sup>3</sup>. In Romantic terms, Enlightenment came to refer to a sudden breakthrough in consciousness where Reality revealed itself to the awed meditation practitioner. It is ironic that the Romantic thinkers used the key term of their rival tradition to indicate the highest realization of Oriental wisdom<sup>4</sup>.

Suzuki's presentation of Zen generated great enthusiasm in the Western intellectual world. Zen was welcomed as a "pure religion" without cultural ballast, a method for attaining enlightenment, a returning to the Original Source, the Ground of Being. The Japanese philosopher Nishida from the Japanese Kyoto school looked for affinities with the Western philosophical tradition, and found them in phenomenology. He introduced the term "pure experience" to describe the ineffable state of enlightenment: a state of being in the world where all the conceptual and categorizing activity of the mind was bracketed, so that reality could be perceived in its natural fullness, undistorted by the mind.

This reading of Zen has proven very attractive and influential throughout the twentieth century. In the Sixties, it was appropriated by the counter culture. In the search for enlightenment, Zen's universal mysticism presented itself as an ideology-free approach. The Zen masters were radical iconoclasts, whose rebellious individuality served for many as an inspiring example.

## 2. Historicist Zen

After World War II, a different kind of Zen studies, characterized by a historicist approach, started to blossom. The Chinese historian Hu Shi approached the Zen tradition as merely one religious movement among others, and its development as an integral part of larger political and social developments.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent historical overview of this development see Clarke (1997).

<sup>4</sup> The list of symbols used in the Zen texts for the goal of Zen is extensive, and changes over time. In his book on the teachings of Zen master Huangbo, Wright notices that only the seldomly used symbol *ming* could be translated as "to enlighten, to shed light upon, to clarify, and hence, to become aware of." (Wright 1998 181 n3).

Suzuki considered this approach as reductionist. In the Seventies, Hu Shi was joined by the Japanese researcher Yanagida Seizan. Yanagida, a practising Zen Buddhist, largely agreed with Hu Shi in rejecting the Romantic approach to Zen. Over the past decades, several Western students of Yanagida have carried his line of research further.

So far almost all Western literature on Zen has either followed the modern historicist tradition (analyzing its history and sociology), or the modern Romantic tradition (looking for ultimate truth and transformation beyond the conventions of time and place, and attempting to transmit this ultimate truth to the West). Representatives of both traditions usually criticize each other vehemently<sup>5</sup>.

The historicists point out that first of all, Romantic, idealized transmissions of Zen are inaccurate. The Zen that Romantics present to the West has never actually existed in Asia. It is a shared fantasy, a blank projection screen for all kinds of unacknowledged longings for perfection. When looking at such a form of Zen, we are actually looking at our own distorted reflection, as if through a looking glass. Moreover, such an idealized Zen could be called a form of “reverse Orientalism”. Rather than consider the East as inferior, it is now elevated to a superior position, a fountainhead of spiritual truth and wisdom, a panacea for the West that has lost touch with its spiritual sources. Ever since the nineteenth century this has indeed been a strategy for cultural critics of the West.

According to the Romantics, on the other hand, the historicists miss the point of Zen altogether. They approach it with the logocentric toolbox of Western rationality, and thereby destroy its transformative potential. “If all you have is a hammer, you treat everything you encounter as if it were a nail”, humanistic psychologist Maslow wrote. By their reductionistic approach, the historicists rob Zen of its spiritual value.

The historicists and the Romantics seem to be on separate tracks, aiming at different goals. The historicists are looking for rational, objective knowledge (enlightenment in the Western sense of the word); the Romantics are looking for spiritual transformation (enlightenment in the Eastern sense of the word).

Partly as a result of the clash between historicists and Romantics, Zen is experiencing a rude awakening these days<sup>6</sup>. The realization is dawning that enlightenment may be not all that it’s marked up to be. In *Zen at War* (Victoria 1997) the shadow side of Japanese Zen masters during World War II was documented. As scholarship increases, and more Dunhuang texts are being translated and annotated<sup>7</sup>, it becomes apparent that the “rhetoric of immediacy”<sup>8</sup> in Zen needs to be seen for what it is — a rhetoric indeed.

<sup>5</sup> Faure gives an overview of the development and current state of Chan/Zen studies in the West ([www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/Miscellaneous/ChanZenStudies.htm](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/Miscellaneous/ChanZenStudies.htm)).

<sup>6</sup> *Rude awakenings* is the title of a collection of critical essays on Zen and the Kyoto school. (Heisig & Maraldo, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Dunhuang is a town in Northwestern China where, in the beginning of the twentieth century, a large number of Buddhist manuscripts and artefacts was found.

<sup>8</sup> An expression coined by Bernard Faure.

Zen in the West is currently at a crossroads. How to present itself to the world at large now that the myth of enlightenment has been pierced? What rhetoric strategies to employ now that the rhetoric of immediacy has been exposed? Perhaps what is needed, is an original re-interpretation of Zen — in order to be true to its spirit.

### 3. The hermeneutic turn

Some Western philosophers have looked for a “third way” that would overcome the weaknesses in both the Romantic and the historicist approach. This approach can roughly be characterized as being inspired by philosophical hermeneutics, a way of doing philosophy originally inspired by Heidegger and Gadamer, that also takes much of its cues from Nietzsche.

The American philosopher Dale Wright has recently attempted to engage Zen philosophically from a perspective that is informed by the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics (Wright 1998). He tries to overcome the opposition of the historicist and the Romantic perspective by showing that both approaches share a set of unquestioned presuppositions, a common worldview: they both think it possible to get access to “the way things really are”. The historicists with their analyses aim at a true and accurate picture of Zen as a historical and sociological phenomenon, and the true interpretation of Zen texts. The Romantics try to go “beyond the mind”, and aim at directly beholding “spirit”, possibly through a faculty of mystical intuition or other extra-rational means. Both parties are convinced they can get through to the thing itself, as it exists objectively, independent of the mind of the one who understands. Some kind of pure understanding is considered possible, either through eliminating bias in true scientific fashion, or through transcending rational understanding (seen as inherently limited) altogether.

The assumption of a world outside and independent of the human mind, waiting to be discovered, has been called “the myth of the given”. In his epochal book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty (1979) showed that Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein have each in their own way destroyed this modern myth in their philosophy. What is left is a post-modern philosophy, minimally defined as that which comes after modern philosophy, having recognized the untenability of the myth of the given. The human mind is no “glassy essence”, that can accurately reflect what is out there. Our minds are context-dependent, our knowing is always perspectival. Any form of understanding is always situated in particular cultural and historical settings. It is impossible for us to assume a “God’s eye view” on reality.

One of the responses in Western philosophy to this realization was the turn to hermeneutics. Originally conceived as the scientific study of how to arrive at objective, reliable interpretations of texts, hermeneutics in the twentieth century radicalized the volatile character of all interpretation. Every interpretation is

contextually and historically determined, and therefore open to change. There is no such thing as a final interpretation of a text, of history, of reality. What is given to us, is always mediated through language, culture and history, and is interpreted by us according to the contextual clues we manage to gather. Along these lines, Heidegger and especially his student Gadamer developed a philosophical hermeneutics.

The godfather of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes, adapted a radical skepticism for his famous *Meditations*. By doubting everything as much as possible, he attempted to arrive at “clear and simple” knowledge. The godfather of postmodern philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, adopted a “skepticism towards skepticism”. Once the presupposition of clear and simple knowledge is recognized as untenable, the practice of skepticism changes. Our sceptical attitude is shaped by language, culture and history as well. Neither pure knowledge nor pure skepticism is possible. Nietzsche advocated a practice of “strong skepticism”: with full awareness of the perspectival nature of all interpretation, still continuing to advance new creative re-interpretations to free ourselves from the constraints of more limited previous interpretations<sup>9</sup>. Such an ongoing process of interpretation aims at disclosing ever more openness and degrees of freedom.

### 3.1. *Zen and philosophical hermeneutics*

Wright attempts something similar in his philosophical meditations on Zen. His aim is not to arrive at a “clear and simple” picture of what Zen is, or what Zen texts mean. Instead of reaching for the transcultural, transhistorical “truth” of Zen (a truth often considered to be beyond language as well), his meditations are primarily “readings”. What happens when we read and interpret a text, a Zen text? Apart from our own work, our attempt at interpretation, the text also “works” on us. We become changed by the texts we read, we can’t be impassive observers of texts, especially not of Zen texts, that expressly aim at changing the reader. And beyond our own work, and the work of the text, is the work done by the larger cultural and historical forces that we inevitably operate within. To become more aware of those inner and outer workings is the aim of his philosophical meditations.

Both the historicist and the Romantic avoid being targeted and challenged by the Zen text, Wright notices (Wright 1998 39). The scientist keeps a safe distance from the text: it is about someone else in another time and place. There is no need for himself to be impacted by the text, or to assume that it could be relevant to his own life circumstances. The Romantic avoids the impact of the Zen text in a very different way: he already knows that the text is about enlightenment, and that it contains a very deep understanding of an ahistoric

<sup>9</sup> See van Tongeren (1999) and van der Braak (2004) on Nietzsche’s strong skepticism.

truth. The Romantic projects his own, relatively safe, meaning onto the text, and leaves the vastly differing contexts of time and place out of the picture<sup>10</sup>.

### 3.2. *A different understanding of 'understanding'*

Doing philosophical hermeneutics implies a different conception of truth and understanding. When the myth of the given is dispelled, a correspondence theory of truth (*adequatio intellectus et rei*) is no longer relevant. There are no 'things' out there, no 'facts' to be discovered. As Nietzsche said, "there are no facts, only interpretations" (KSA 12,7[60]). Understanding, in the hermeneutic sense of the word, does not refer to being able to grasp facts or concepts, but to an ongoing, preconscious activity. As Wright expresses it: "Understanding, in this sense, is our most practical attunement to the world, the way we are embedded in the world, oriented to it, and engaged with it. Although the particular shape of understanding differs from person to person and from culture to culture, it is always there as the essential background out of which we live and work." (Wright 1998 41).

We understand each thing through its various relations to others, through countless interconnections and juxtapositions. This process is as much a social practice as it is an individual, subjective activity. We are socialized into a vast store of understanding that is culturally established. In a way we don't produce understanding, we are immersed in it. No matter how isolated we are, we belong to traditions of understanding and engage in them socially.

Such a new view of understanding has radical repercussions for the philosophical and historical study of any thinker and text. But especially with regard to the study of Zen and Zen texts, a new picture emerges. To our modern minds, a Zen text must be the product of an individual mind, arising out of a personal inner subjectivity. The Romantic approach has always portrayed Zen as a movement of radical individualism. But this might tell us more about our own Romantic preoccupations with inner depths of subjectivity, than about Zen. In 9<sup>th</sup> century China, for example, very different notions of subjectivity and individuality were current. Zen was very much a communal phenomenon, a particular "form of life". All activity in a Zen monastery was directed to the collective matter of awakening. The meaning of such terms was invisibly structured by a shared common understanding, based on the narratives on the Buddha and the Zen patriarchs.

Therefore, in order to be able to say something meaningful about a Zen text, we need to be initiated into the particular forms of understanding, the social, religious, philosophical and cultural contexts that gave rise to this particular text. As Wright notices: "We need to work our way into the language and customs

<sup>10</sup> Incidentally, as Zen texts make clear, the world of interpretation extends way beyond texts. Zen koan texts are full of gestures, movements, signals, sounds, behaviors and situations that require interpretation. Anything in a Zen story can become a sign that needs to be "read" properly.



of local practice before we can share in the subtleties of understanding. This is hard work, and typically not even attempted unless it appears that something important is to be gained from it. In our time, Romanticism has supplied this justification, and the tradition of historicism has initiated the quest for a background of understanding sufficient for reading Zen.” (Wright 1998 47).

This opens up an interesting conundrum. Once our Romantic hopes for finding a profound absolute truth in Zen, or even for gaining enlightenment from reading the Zen texts, have been dashed, what will motivate us to do the hard work to understand them?

### 3.3. *A different interpretation of ‘interpretation’*

Given this new understanding of understanding, what does it mean when we speak of interpretation? Philosophical hermeneutics distinguishes the relationship between understanding and interpretation in a reversed way: it’s not that our interpretations lead to understanding, as is usually thought; our interpretations are based on the pre-conscious forms of understanding that constitute our world. As Heidegger puts it in section 32 of *Being and Time*: “interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding: the latter does not arise from the former. Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding.” (Heidegger 1962 188)

Unless the object of interpretation is understood in some sense already (pre-understanding), there neither would, nor could, be any interpretation of it. In interpretation we come to consciously know what we have understood pre-consciously. Interpretation makes our implicit understanding explicit.

Wright puts it as follows: “When we understand something, we understand it ‘in terms of’ something else already familiar and available within our world.[...] Interpretations are exercises in connecting one thing to another, a phenomenon to an image in our minds, and that connection to the totality of our understanding.” (Wright 1998 50).

This is why the scientific focus on eliminating preconceptions doesn’t work. Without preconceptions, we would never be able to understand something foreign. Only by connecting it to something already known, can it become meaningful to us. Therefore, truthful interpretation consists not in the avoidance of projection and prejudice, but rather in their critical appraisal. We have to locate our inappropriate projections so that they can be revised or replaced by more appropriate ones. The criteria for such more appropriate projections can ultimately only be pragmatic in nature.

Both the Romantic and the historicist approach tend to assume that there must be some original meaning that can be used as a measure to decide which interpretation is correct. The Romantic, in his search for true Zen, in his interpretation of its texts tries to capture the authentic voice of their author. The historian tries to find out “what really happened”, what it was really like to be a



9<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Zen master. But what if there is no original meaning, but only a series of consecutive re-interpretations? Zen texts, like any texts, stand in a long history of interpretation, just like our understanding of them is only possible in the terms given to us by our own long history of interpretation (the Romantic and scientific ideologies that have shaped us into the interpreting subjects that we are now).

Becoming aware of this fact opens up another methodological approach: a genealogical one. First introduced by Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morality*, and applied by Foucault in his works, genealogy digs up the string of interpretations that hides underneath a seemingly unified phenomenon.

### 3.4. *The role of language*

Crucial in understanding the Zen tradition is coming to terms with its obvious paradoxes with respect to language. Time and again we read that the true matter of Zen cannot be grasped by language. Zen claims to be a transmission outside the scriptures. This is the rhetoric that defines the movement as a separate school. And yet all such utterances are being made in language, over and over again. Zen is the most literate Chinese Buddhist tradition. The Zen masters don't follow Wittgenstein's famous dictum that what one cannot speak of, one must be silent of. And in the Zen koans, language is often claimed to have a transformative, liberating effect.

Many interpreters have attempted to come to terms with this paradox by ascribing an instrumentalist theory of language to Zen: language is an instrument or tool available for our use in achieving certain specific communicative goals. It is a means to an end. Although language can never describe the state of enlightenment (which is beyond thought and language), it can still be a useful tool to point towards it. The famous Zen metaphor speaks of "the finger pointing to the moon". Language is an exoteric tool that can prepare the uninitiated Zen practitioner to the esoteric reality of enlightenment.

Wright points out that, if one interprets the enlightenment experience from within such an instrumentalist theory of language, it is tempting to conclude that it is not linguistically and culturally mediated (Wright 1998 67). It corresponds to some kind of universal depth structure that underlies the various cultural and religious surface structures. Nishida coined the term "pure experience" as a way to express this philosophically (Nishida 1992, originally published in 1911). The instrumentalist view of language seems to naturally lead to a universalist theory of religious experience. Enlightenment is not only beyond language, but also beyond cultural differences. An interesting consequence would be that Zen enlightenment would not be any different from Christian enlightenment, or Platonic enlightenment. In other words, what "they" have in China and Japan is not different from what "we" have in our own religious and philosophical traditions.

Such a view amounts to a denial of the otherness of Zen. It is a safe and reassuring thought that in Zen, we won't find anything fundamentally new, but

merely a confirmation of our own highest experiences. What the Zen masters teach us, Meister Eckhart already wrote about.

But is language best conceived as an instrument? Although we often use language as a tool, it also often uses us. It determines the range of what we can perceive and experience. According to modern theories of language, language is already embedded in the content of our experience. Perception, experience and language are closely interwoven. We always experience something *as* something. Anything not experienced *as* something in particular is simply not experienced. A famous anthropological story tells us that when European ships first visited the South Pacific, the native islanders never saw them coming. They simply didn't perceive the ships, because they were too unfamiliar to them. The islanders didn't have the concept "ship".

Through language games we are socialized into forms of life. Seen from this perspective, we are interested in "enlightenment" because it's a meaningful concept to us, due to the religious and philosophical language games that we have been brought up in. If not, all Buddhist texts would be completely irrelevant to us (like they were to the Western world until the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Developments in contemporary philosophy and religion, perhaps especially the death of God, have made us take notice of Buddhist texts. God is dead, but thank God we still have enlightenment.

#### 4. Toward cross-cultural hermeneutic perspectives on Zen

When we apply philosophical hermeneutics to a foreign cultural phenomenon like Zen (far removed from us in time and place), it is important that our approach is also intercultural or cross-cultural. Only by investigating this new and unknown philosophy in comparison to our own Western philosophical tradition, will we be able to come to any interpretations at all. And the more consciously we undertake this, the more appropriate our projections will be. Only by means of comparison and contrast, Wright notes, only by seeing identity and difference, and thus by relation to our own culture's customs and practices, will we be able to see what a foreign cultural phenomenon is. The Western philosopher, who is sensitive to issues and forms of thought in his own tradition, will be able to ask good questions, and to see what is worthy of reflection or further inquiry. He will notice which questions are asked that are lacking in Western philosophy, or which Western philosophical questions are not asked or not answered, and he will be interested in asking why and to what effect.

In order to come to a more full and appropriate interpretation of Zen, it is important on one hand to appreciate how truly foreign and "other" this tradition is (it takes a lot of time and effort to discern otherness), and not jump to interpretations too quickly: this would be just a case of uncritically projecting our own preconceptions onto it (the dangers of a Romantic approach). On the other hand, approaching it without preconceptions (the impossible striving of the

historicists) will make any meaningful interpretation impossible. Zen texts will appear just as strange artefacts from a distant time in a faraway country, perhaps of interest to historians, but not as a vital contribution to philosophy today that can have a meaningful impact on our lives.

When we recognize how the term “enlightenment” peaks our interest because it fits within our language games, we become more open to contemplate the otherness of the Zen tradition, and its use of enlightenment. In that case, it would be exactly the difference and uniqueness of Zen that would make it worthwhile to study it. We would no longer be interested in Zen because “they” have what “we” have too, but because “they” experience something that “we” don’t, and because their language has opened up a very interesting set of possibilities for them. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche already called attention to the fact that different language families would be able to disclose very different aspects of reality to us:

“It’s precisely where a relationship between languages is present that it cannot be avoided that, thanks to the common philosophy of grammar — I mean thanks to the unconscious mastery and guidance exercised by the same grammatical functions — everything has been prepared from the beginning for a similar development and order of philosophical systems, just as the road to certain other possibilities of interpreting the world seems sealed off. [...] There will be a greater probability that philosophers from the region of the Ural-Altaic language (in which the idea of the subject is most poorly developed) will look differently ‘into the world’ and will be found on other pathways than Indo-Germans or Muslims.” (Nietzsche KSA JGB 20)

Although the Romantic projection of enlightenment as a universal mystical experience beyond thought and language is no longer acceptable to current philosophical sensibilities, this doesn’t condemn us to a kind of historicist relativism. Reading Zen with a comparative application of the insights of philosophical hermeneutics may yield various new and previously unknown aspects and perspectives on reality. Precisely because Zen turns out to be much more “other” and foreign than we could ever imagine, its study could be very fruitful, yes even enlightening indeed. In this way, Western and Eastern enlightenment could come together in very unexpected and unforeseen ways.

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## Samenvatting

De westerse filosofische receptie van de zenboeddhistische traditie werd aanvankelijk gekenmerkt door een romantisch en geïdealiseerd perspectief. Zen werd beschouwd als een universele mystiek, dat via meditatie toegang bood tot een intuïtieve realisatie van wijsheid, en een nonduale staat van bewustzijn, "verlichting". Latere historische studies van de zentraditie binnen haar sociale en politieke context benadrukten echter dat een dergelijke benadering een vorm van omgekeerd Oriëntalisme was, een idealisering van het Oosten als bron van wijsheid. Vanuit een romantisch perspectief hebben dergelijke historische studies echter onvoldoende oog voor het transformatieve karakter van zen als spirituele traditie.

Een intercultureel hermeneutische benadering zou de zwakheden van zowel de romantische als de historische benadering kunnen overstijgen. De verlichtingservaring is in deze optiek niet zozeer een ongemedieerde "zuivere ervaring", alswel onlosmakelijk verbonden met een voorbewust verstaan, en onvermijdelijk ingebed in een sociale, culturele en historische context. Dit impliciete voorbewuste verstaan kan worden geëxpliciteerd middels een genealogische en perspectivistische methode. De taal wordt daarbij niet zozeer beschouwd als een instrument om persoonlijke ervaringen mee uit te drukken, maar als een sociaal en cultureel verschijnsel dat het individu mede vormt.

Een dergelijke benadering behoudt meer openheid voor het "andere" en eigene karakter van zen, en kan daardoor wellicht op onverwachte en onvoorziene wijze "verlichting" opleveren.

